SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
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Gambling on ex-Soviet states

U.S. aid makes sense whether or not reform succeeds, says Defense Secretary Perry

*Defense Secretary **William Perry**, in office just over a month, begins an eight-day trip Wednesday to Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine to "influence those countries to keep moving in a positive direction." Perry talked about U.S. policy toward those and other countries — including Bosnia and North Korea — in an interview with USA TODAY's editorial board. Here are his comments edited from that interview:*

Q: Boris Yeltsin is losing ground to hard-liners, his reforms are slowing down, and critics say the aid we're giving the former Soviet Union is just helping a future enemy. Should we reverse course?

A: Our view is that we should focus our help on those things which are beneficial to us whether or not the reform succeeds. That's what we're really focusing our programs on — joint American-Russian programs, American-Ukraine programs, American-Kazakhstan programs, American-Belarus programs — that assist them in areas that are important to our national security.

Q: For instance?

A: Perhaps the single most dramatic example is the shutting down of ICBMs in Ukraine. These are missiles that are directed toward the U.S. They are removing these ICBMs from their launch facilities, they're disabling them, putting them in trains, shipping them to Russia to a dismantling site. This is an example of what some people call defense by other means. From our point of view, it's worth doing whatever happens.

Q: Ukraine has destroyed or dismantled some of the older weapons, but what about the newer, more sophisticated ones?

A: We met with President Leonid Kravchuk and Minister of Defense Vitaliy Radetsky last week. They told us that the trains were already crossing the border into Russia carrying SS-19 and SS-24 warheads. The SS-24 is the most modern of their ICBMs. Those missiles, they said, are being removed from the launch sites at Pervomaysk. I asked President Kravchuk if during my visit he would allow Radetsky to take me to Pervomaysk and observe the dismantlement in process. And he said yes. So I expect I'll have a more confident answer a week from now.

Q: What other programs fit that mold?

A: Assisting Russia and Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus in the conversion of their defense industry into the production of civilian products. Their motive for that is simple and straightforward: It helps their economy. Our motive is that it removes one of the elements of the threat to us. One specific project is designed to help them take a defense factory and convert it to the production of pre-fab housing.

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Q: Another thorny problem you inherit is Bosnia. If U.S. troops participate in any future peacekeeping mission there, what's the minimum number you can put in and still have an effective fighting force?

A: I can't give you a number. First, we have to have a peace treaty which spells out the functions that would be required for peacekeeping. We don't have that yet. As a political matter, we want U.S. forces to be less than half of the total of the U.N. forces.

Q: You were criticized for being too specific in detailing what the allied forces were prepared to do or not do to stop Serbian aggression in Bosnia. Do you think that was a strategic error?

A: No, I don't think so. We in the United States, and we in NATO, are being pressed to extend the air coverage from the protection of Sarajevo to the protection of other cities in Bosnia — particularly the safe-haven cities. I have a professional judgment that air power cannot be used effectively for that purpose. It is crucially important for not only NATO, but the United Nations, and the United States, when it is making statements about what it will or will not do, not to be making empty threats. We should not be threatening an action which we do not have the ability to follow through on.

Q: What should we be doing?

A: We have to use diplomacy rather than military force. And indeed, we did that with the Muslims and the Croats, and that's what led to this new federation agreement (between them).

Q: Are there lessons about what happened in Somalia that we should apply to further engagement either in peacemaking or peacekeeping?

A: Yes. When we are involved in a military operation, particularly if it happens to be successful, there's a tendency to extend it. It's what in the military we call "mission creep." And we have been criticized in Somalia for that "mission creep" for having had a very successful humanitarian operation to protect the convoys, and for extending it beyond what our capabilities really could do. In Bosnia we don't plan to make that mistake.

Q: Where do you draw the line on where we get in and where we don't?

A: You have to start with what your political objectives are. Let me take it in Bosnia. Our political objectives there are twofold: first, to stop the war from spreading beyond Bosnia and even beyond the Balkans. And the second objective there is to do what we can to limit the violence, particularly the civilian casualties while the negotiations are going on. Our main thrust has been on diplomatic initiatives, not on military initiatives.

Q: The U.S. also faces a threat of war over North Korea's attempt to go nuclear. What will stop them?

A: North Korea fits in very high on the list of concerns around the world. We believe that they have some fissile material, some plutonium, and that they have a program to develop nuclear weapons. It's even possible they might already have done that. The second concern is that they have a reactor, which would allow them to generate much larger quantities of plutonium. And in addition to that, they have a missile development program, which is developing medium- and maybe intermediate-range ballistic missiles. If you put all that together, whatever problem we have with them today may be compounded three or four years from now with a program which might have a dozen or so nuclear weapons and perhaps a missile capable of delivering them to targets in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan. We are again trying to deal with this problem through diplomacy.

Q: What if diplomacy fails?

A: The alternatives beyond that become very unattractive. One is imposing sanctions on North Korea. The North Koreans have already said that the imposition of sanctions they would consider a declaration of war. Now, we could say, "Well, that's rhetoric." But on the other hand, we ought to listen pretty seriously to what they're saying. The sanctions themselves might not be effective. North Korea is already a country that's isolated. It doesn't depend to a great extent on imports. It does depend on energy imports, but those can come in mostly from China. So any imposition of sanctions, to be effective, would require the full cooperation of China and Japan. The alternative beyond sanctions is a military alternative. Our military leaders have stated while we could win that war, there would be very great damage and hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Q: Yet we're threatening to punish China for human rights violations. Does it make sense to isolate China?

A: It's of highest importance to the United States to remain engaged with China. There are two very different reasons for this. One is that China is one of the fastest growing economic powers in the world today. The other is national security reasons, because they are the dominant military power in that region of the world, and they have the ability to influence issues in which we have a profound interest. For example, any policy that we want to embark on in North Korea is done better if it's done in cooperation with China, and it's made much more difficult, maybe even impossible, if China's blocking it.